

Mental Health Challenges among Healthcare Workers in Saudi Arabia: A Narrative Review

May alquwaidi¹, Ghalib Marwi Alanazi², Sultan Saad AlHarbi³, Khaled Manawer AlMutairi⁴, Nader Eid Matar AlMutairi⁵, Ibrahim Muhammad Al -Arij⁶, Amal M. Alsabeg⁷, Abdulmohsin Abdulaziz Alhassan⁸, Nasser alotaibi⁹, Aisha Laheg Assiri¹⁰, Mohammad sliman Althobaiti¹¹, Bassam saeed alshehri¹², Asma Odah Alanazi¹³, Wejdan Talal Sajini¹⁴, Wejdan mahmood abdullah Al sindi¹⁵

1. Health information technician, Diploma in medical records, National guard hospital, Saudi Arabia
2. Emergency Trauma Technician, National Guard Health Affairs, Saudi Arabia
3. Emergency Trauma Technician, Military School of Allied Health Sciences, Saudi Arabia
4. Specialization Emergency Trauma Technician, Saudi Arabia
5. Trauma Technician, National Guard Military School of Allied Health Sciences, Saudi Arabia
6. paramedic technician, King Abdullah College for Leadership and staff, Saudi Arabia
7. Clinical Dietitian , Saudi Arabia
8. Paramedic, EMS department, Saudi Arabia
9. Nurse, Dirab, Saudi Arabia
10. Radiology Technologist, National Guard Hospital, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
11. Pharmacy technician, National Guard Clinic in Taif, Saudi Arabia
12. Pharmacy technician, King Abdulaziz Medical City, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
13. Dental Assistant, Saudi Arabia, aleneziasl@mnga.med.sa
14. Laboratory technician II, Saudi Arabia, sajiniwa@ngha.med.sa
15. Laboratory technician II, Saudi Arabia, Alsindiw@ngha.med.sa

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ABSTRACT

Healthcare workers (HCWs) in Saudi Arabia have faced immense psychological challenges, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The increased workload, fear of infection, social isolation, and emotional exhaustion have contributed to high rates of anxiety, depression, burnout, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This review explores the mental health impact on HCWs in Saudi Arabia, examining contributing factors and potential coping mechanisms. The study also highlights the importance of institutional support, workplace interventions, and policy recommendations to improve the psychological well-being of HCWs. By synthesizing findings from existing literature, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the mental health challenges faced by HCWs in Saudi Arabia and propose strategies to address them.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, psychological challenges, anxiety, depression, burnout, patient care

1. INTRODUCTION

Healthcare workers (HCWs) are the backbone of any healthcare system, providing essential medical services to the population. However, the demanding nature of their profession exposes them to high levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. The COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified these challenges, placing HCWs at the forefront of a global health crisis. In Saudi Arabia, frontline healthcare workers have experienced unprecedented psychological distress due to long working hours, fear of contracting the virus, and the emotional toll of managing critically ill patients (Ayanian, 2020). The mental health challenges faced by HCWs have far-reaching consequences, including burnout, decreased job satisfaction, and potential adverse effects on patient care. The mental health challenges faced by HCWs in Saudi Arabia are not unique to the pandemic but have been exacerbated by it. Studies indicate that mental health issues among HCWs have been prevalent even before the pandemic, with significant levels of burnout and stress reported in various healthcare settings (AlAteeq et al., 2020). However, the COVID-19 crisis has intensified these issues, making mental health support for HCWs more critical than ever.

This narrative review aims to explore the mental health challenges faced by HCWs in Saudi Arabia, focusing on the psychological impact, contributing factors, and strategies for improving mental well-being. By synthesizing findings from existing literature, this review seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue and propose practical recommendations to address the mental health needs of HCWs in the country.

2 PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT ON HEALTHCARE WORKERS

2.1 Anxiety and Depression

Anxiety and depression are among the most common mental health issues affecting HCWs in Saudi Arabia, with a significant increase during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies have shown that the prevalence of anxiety among HCWs rose substantially, with a large proportion of healthcare professionals reporting moderate to severe symptoms (Lai et al., 2020). The uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, fear of infection, and concerns about spreading the virus to family members contributed to heightened anxiety levels.

A study conducted by AlAteeq et al. (2020) found that approximately 50% of HCWs in Saudi Arabia reported moderate to severe anxiety, with 30% experiencing depressive symptoms. The emotional toll of witnessing severe cases, managing critically ill patients, and the constant fear of contracting the virus themselves or transmitting it to loved ones took a significant psychological toll on HCWs.

Further research by Chew et al. (2020) highlighted that anxiety and depression were particularly prevalent among nurses and emergency physicians due to their direct exposure to COVID-19 patients. The emotional burden of witnessing patient deaths and providing end-of-life care added to their psychological distress, exacerbating feelings of anxiety and depression.

2.2 Burnout And Emotional Exhaustion

Burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, is a common psychological condition among HCWs worldwide, and Saudi Arabia is no exception. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased burnout rates among HCWs in the country due to the overwhelming workload and prolonged stress (Du et al., 2020).

Almalki et al. (2021) reported that over 60% of HCWs in Saudi Arabia exhibited symptoms of burnout one year into the pandemic. Younger HCWs, particularly those working in intensive care units (ICUs) and emergency departments, were at a higher risk due to the intense pressure of managing critically ill patients. The emotional toll of making difficult ethical decisions, such as prioritizing patients for treatment based on resource availability, further contributed to burnout and moral distress.

The consequences of burnout among HCWs in Saudi Arabia have been far-reaching, with many healthcare professionals experiencing job dissatisfaction, decreased productivity, and even considering leaving the profession altogether. This has the potential to exacerbate existing workforce shortages and further strain the healthcare system.

2.3 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD has been widely reported among HCWs in Saudi Arabia, particularly those working in COVID-19 wards and emergency settings. The trauma of witnessing patient deaths, dealing with critically ill patients, and experiencing moral dilemmas has led to lasting psychological effects (Li et al., 2020). The fear of an uncertain future, combined with the emotional burden of managing patient care, has led to increased stress and trauma among HCWs.

Montemurro (2020) emphasized that HCWs who lacked prior experience in handling infectious disease outbreaks were more vulnerable to developing PTSD symptoms. The constant exposure to distressing situations, coupled with the fear of contracting the virus themselves, has had a profound impact on the mental health of many HCWs in Saudi Arabia.

The long-term consequences of PTSD among HCWs cannot be overlooked, as it can lead to decreased job performance, absenteeism, and further exacerbation of mental health issues. Providing timely psychological support and trauma-focused interventions is crucial to mitigate the impact of PTSD on HCWs in Saudi Arabia.

3. CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

3.1 Workload and Long Working Hours

One of the leading causes of mental health challenges among HCWs in Saudi Arabia is excessive workload and long working hours. The increased patient load during the pandemic resulted in extended shifts, reduced rest periods, and heightened physical and emotional strain (Greenberg et al., 2020). Many HCWs reported working shifts exceeding 12 hours, leading to fatigue, decreased job satisfaction, and impaired decision-making abilities.

The chronic stress associated with long working hours has contributed to anxiety, depression, and burnout among HCWs in Saudi Arabia. The demanding nature of their work, coupled with the added pressures of the pandemic, has taken a significant toll on their mental well-being. Prolonged exposure to such high-stress

situations can have long-lasting consequences, including increased risk of chronic health conditions and decreased overall quality of life.

3.2 Fear of Infection and Transmission

The fear of contracting COVID-19 and spreading it to family members has been a significant stressor for HCWs in Saudi Arabia. Many HCWs opted to isolate themselves from their families to minimize the risk of transmission, leading to emotional distress and loneliness (Chew et al., 2020). The constant worry about potential exposure and the possibility of infecting loved ones has contributed to heightened levels of anxiety and depression among healthcare professionals.

Studies indicate that HCWs who directly interacted with COVID-19 patients had a significantly higher risk of developing anxiety-related disorders. The stigma associated with being a frontline worker further exacerbated their stress levels, as some HCWs faced discrimination and ostracization from their communities (Zhang et al., 2020).

3.3 Social Isolation and Stigma

Social isolation and stigma have negatively impacted the mental health of HCWs in Saudi Arabia. Many HCWs reported being ostracized by their communities due to fears of virus transmission (Nezlek et al., 2012). Some HCWs faced discrimination in public spaces, being labeled as potential carriers of the virus, which contributed to feelings of isolation and emotional exhaustion (Choi et al., 2020).

The social stigma surrounding COVID-19 and the perceived risk associated with HCWs has resulted in a lack of support from their communities, further exacerbating the psychological distress they face. The inability to seek solace and emotional support from social networks has compounded the mental health challenges faced by HCWs in Saudi Arabia.

3.4 Lack of Institutional Support

Despite efforts to provide mental health support, many HCWs reported a lack of adequate institutional support from their employers. Insufficient psychological counseling services, limited peer support networks, and inadequate mental health training have contributed to increased stress levels and a feeling of being unsupported (Chen et al., 2020).

Duan and Zhu (2020) emphasized the importance of providing HCWs with access to professional mental health services to help them cope with stress and trauma. The absence of such support systems within healthcare institutions has hindered the ability of HCWs in Saudi Arabia to manage the psychological challenges they face effectively.

4. COPING MECHANISMS AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

4.1 Psychological Support Programs

Recognizing the mental health challenges faced by HCWs, Saudi Arabia has introduced various psychological support programs to address these issues. The Ministry of Health established mental health hotlines, virtual counseling services, and peer support groups to provide emotional support and guidance to healthcare professionals (Ministry of Health Saudi Arabia, 2020).

These initiatives have been instrumental in providing a platform for HCWs to share their experiences, seek professional advice, and access resources to manage their mental well-being. However, more efforts are needed to increase awareness and accessibility of these support services to ensure that all HCWs in need can benefit from them.

4.2 Workplace Interventions

Hospitals and healthcare institutions in Saudi Arabia have implemented measures to reduce burnout and promote mental well-being among their staff. These interventions include adjusting work schedules to reduce excessive overtime, providing designated rest areas, and ensuring adequate staffing levels to alleviate the workload (Almutairi et al., 2020).

Encouraging open communication between HCWs and their supervisors has also been a crucial step in addressing mental health challenges. By fostering an environment where healthcare professionals feel comfortable sharing their concerns and seeking support, healthcare institutions can better understand and address the psychological needs of their staff.

4.3 Training and Resilience-Building

To better equip HCWs in Saudi Arabia with the necessary coping mechanisms, training programs focused on stress management, emotional resilience, and self-care have been introduced. These initiatives aim to provide healthcare professionals with the tools and strategies needed to manage psychological distress effectively (Xiao et al., 2020).

By promoting resilience-building and fostering a culture of self-care, healthcare institutions in Saudi Arabia can empower their staff to better navigate the challenges of their profession and maintain their mental well-being, even in the face of adversity.

5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Enhancing Mental Health Resources

To address the mental health challenges faced by HCWs in Saudi Arabia, it is crucial to increase access to mental health professionals and counseling services. Hospitals and healthcare facilities should establish dedicated mental health units within their premises to provide immediate support and interventions for healthcare professionals in need.

Additionally, increasing the number of mental health professionals available to cater to the specific needs of HCWs can ensure that timely and appropriate care is provided. By prioritizing mental health resources for healthcare professionals, Saudi Arabia can better support the well-being of its frontline workers.

5.2 Promoting Work-Life Balance

Implementing policies that promote a healthy work-life balance for HCWs is essential in reducing burnout and improving job satisfaction. These policies could include limiting overtime hours, ensuring adequate rest days, and offering flexible scheduling options to accommodate personal commitments (Temsah et al., 2020). By recognizing the importance of work-life balance and taking proactive measures to support it, healthcare institutions in Saudi Arabia can foster a more sustainable and mentally resilient workforce, better equipped to handle the demands of their profession.

5.3 Addressing Stigma and Social Support

Raising awareness about the mental health challenges faced by HCWs and addressing the stigma associated with seeking support is crucial. Public education campaigns and initiatives aimed at promoting understanding and empathy towards healthcare professionals can help foster a supportive environment within communities.

Encouraging peer support networks and facilitating community engagement can also provide emotional relief and a sense of belonging for HCWs. By fostering a culture of inclusivity and support, Saudi Arabia can help mitigate the social isolation and stigma experienced by its healthcare workforce.

6. CONCLUSION

HCWs in Saudi Arabia have faced significant mental health challenges, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Anxiety, depression, burnout, and PTSD have been prevalent due to excessive workload, fear of infection, social isolation, and lack of institutional support. The psychological impact on HCWs has far-reaching consequences, affecting their well-being, job performance, and the overall quality of healthcare services provided.

Addressing the mental health needs of HCWs in Saudi Arabia requires a multifaceted approach involving institutional support, workplace interventions, and policy reforms. By strengthening mental health resources, promoting work-life balance, addressing stigma, and implementing evidence-based interventions, Saudi Arabia can foster a more resilient and mentally healthy healthcare workforce.

Failure to address the mental health challenges faced by HCWs in Saudi Arabia may lead to long-term consequences, including workforce shortages, decreased quality of care, and a strained healthcare system. It is imperative that policymakers, healthcare institutions, and society as a whole recognize the importance of supporting the mental well-being of those who serve on the frontlines of healthcare, ensuring they receive the care and support they deserve.

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